

A YCLE OF LIFE

IN NATURE

by James K. Wells

Author's Foreword

We call the Ipani the “long-time ago” Eskimos, or those who lived in the traditional way before the white man came. There are only a few now living in Northwest Alaska who would call themselves Ipani Eskimos. This book tells how they supported their families as the seasons changed. The information comes from old people who were the children of Ipani Eskimos.

I am the second son of Ipani parents. I was born at Deering, Alaska, on October 3, 1906. My parents were reindeer herders during my early school days. Later we moved to Kotzebue, which was quite a big town with stores, a cannery, and a Bureau of Indian Affairs school. We lived in a village named Noorvik later.

I've worked as a reindeer herder and a miner. In 1951, I was elected a representative in the Territorial legislature meeting in Juneau. When I wrote this book, I was a lay pastor for the Selawik Friends Church.

April

The fourth new moon, April, is called *Ting mat Tut Kat*, which means “The geese have come, and different species of water fowl are also beginning

to come.” It is springtime for the Ipani Eskimo. There are hopes that the longer and warmer days will be easier. The new moon is a good month because the darkness of night does not cover the sky anymore. During the night the light is only dim. Daylight is on the horizon and then the sun is up again.

It is time for the Ipani Eskimos to set camp at a place where they can go fishing in the summer months. The sun is now warm enough for them to move out of their sod houses. They cut willows or gather driftwood for the frame of a hut. People with enough caribou skins use them for their tents during the summer months. Other families have to use moss and grass houses during the summer. When the frame is set up and tied securely together, moss is put on to cover it. Grass is put on top and covered with sod to keep water from dripping through the roof when it rains.

Families not very well prepared in their winter food supply are happy to see the fish jumping, the ducks swimming, and the birds singing their wonderful songs of the spring. The fish can be caught with bone hooks, and game animals are roaming around for the hunters to catch. Everything caught for food is saved during those days.

The winter cold spells are over, but there will be a hot sun during the summer months that people must endure. The moss huts covered with sod will be cool and comfortable to live in.

May

The fifth new moon, May, is called *Si Qucik Vik*, which means “The ice has gone out.” The geese and ducks are everywhere. The summer has come again. The birds are glad to be back where they lived a year ago. They are also glad to see the people they left. The ptarmigan and seagulls will soon be laying their eggs. The people are always anxious to find some eggs because there were no eggs all winter.

July

The seventh new moon, July, is called *Ting ee Vik*, which means “The geese and ducks and other waterfowl are now flying.” July is really a warm month. The Ipani Eskimo families must be in their moss-covered shelters to keep out of the sun and away from mosquitoes.

People pick blueberries, cranberries, blackberries, and strawberries for winter use. There are several ways to store berries. First, a seal poke [bag made of seal skin] can be used to keep berries juicy. No flavor is lost through evaporation because the opening is tied up. Another container is made from birch bark sewed together. It can be made any size. It is sewed together so it does not leak and put in a safe place where it is not moved around after it is filled up. To keep mold from growing, green leaves are put on top.

A cache is used to store fish. The Ipani man cuts willows for the framework. He ties up the framework with roots of the willow and then starts weaving in willows with green leaves to

close up the cache so rain does not get through. The top is covered with willows, moss, and sod. Inside, he makes a bench where dry fish can be stored.

Once in a while during the summer months, they build a small campfire to smoke fish and to keep bees away. When the Ipani woman cuts up fish, she tries to save as much as she can. She puts the fat guts into one container and the eggs into the other. The flesh part is cleaned and hung up to dry. She cleans the guts so they can be cooked and the oil saved. The eggs she lays on a wooden platter in the sun to dry. Anything useful is always put away until it can be used. "It pays to save what you have," the Ipani Eskimos say.

September

The ninth new moon, September, is called *Ovie rhaum Tut ka*, which means "the last summer month before freeze up." The ice starts to freeze in the month of October, so the summer months are May, June, July, August, and September—five months of open water for boating around the Selawik area. September is the starting point of cold weather. Evenings are beginning to get chilly, and daylight is getting shorter already.

Ipani Eskimos fish nearly every day and hunt ducks, caribous, and bears. The women are still cutting fish to dry. Now some of the fish are stored away whole by taking out only the guts. Smaller fish are stored in holes for dog feed. When the fish get old and have a strong smell they will be good for the dogs in the winter months.

The last summer month is a good time for hunting ducks because they are really fat. Some of the young ducklings are starting to fly. Teenage boys have a good chance to learn how to use the bow and arrow from the kayak by trying to hit these ducks. They also try their dad's spear for ducks and geese.

When the Eskimo hunter catches a good number of ducks and geese, the woman picks all the feathers from them, he skins them, and then she cooks them whole. When all of them are cooked, she cools them off, and stores them in a fish skin.

September has moderately cold air so when anything is hung up to dry, it dries out well. This is the time caribou meat or moose meat is hung up to dry. Even though lots of it is hung, it will not spoil.

Some driftwood must be gathered by the people who need to build a new sod house for their winter home. Some people will have to get rocks that they will use for cooking. Dry grass is pulled to be used as insulation for the sod house before moss and sod are put on.

October

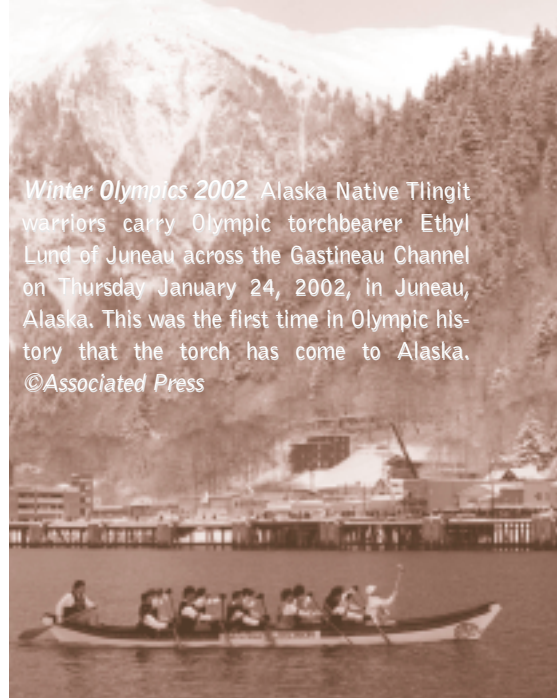
The tenth moon, October, is called *Si Koo Vik*, which means "freeze-up season." This is the first month of the winter the Ipani Eskimo has prepared for during the summer months. The weather is now getting cold, and the river and lakes are freezing up. The ground is also frozen, and the snow is falling. Berry picking is over. It is also getting too cold to be far away from home, so the big game hunters have to return.

Excerpted from *Ipani Eskimos: A Cycle of Life in Nature*, published by Alaska Methodist University Press in 1974. © Alaska Pacific University. Used by permission.

Opposite top left:

Moon rise in the Chugach Mountains A full moon rises over the Chugach mountains of southcentral coastal Alaska. These extend north to the Alaska Range. The Native Alaskans named each moon in conjunction with seasonal conditions.
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Winter Olympics 2002 Alaska Native Tlingit warriors carry Olympic torchbearer Ethyl Lund of Juneau across the Gastineau Channel on Thursday January 24, 2002, in Juneau, Alaska. This was the first time in Olympic history that the torch has come to Alaska.
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WEB SITES OF INTEREST FOR ALASKA:

<http://www.state.ak.us/>

This is the official Web site of the state. It has extensive information and news about the government and resources available to residents and visitors.

<http://www.iditarod.com/>
<http://www.ultimateiditarod.com/>

These two sites have exciting information and history about the annual Iditarod race from Anchorage to Nome.

<http://www.kphsd.k12.ak.us/akhistory/aktools.htm>

This site is a teacher's "tool box" for teaching about Alaska. It has numerous links to other sites about the state's history, people, national parks, and government, among other topics.

<http://www.alaskool.org/>

This site features on-line materials about Alaska Native history, language, culture, and education. The links to native languages are particularly interesting; there are complete texts of linguistic studies and folk tales.